



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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# ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN RELATION TO THE FINDING OF ARTEFACTS ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

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## Introduction

Several issues and problems were raised during a professional development workshop on *Artefacts from excavation to museum* and the writing of *Guidelines for archaeologists in relation to the finding of artefacts*.

Many of these are long-standing problems, such as storage, and it is suggested that these need to be addressed by further discussion by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (HPT) and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage (MCH). Other issues may require clarification by the relevant institutions (MCH, HPT and museums) to assist practicing archaeologists in fulfilling the requirements of the legislation.

## Distinguishing a Maori from a Non-Maori site

Under the Protected Objects Act 1977 (POA) there are major differences between the treatment of Maori artefacts (taonga tūturu) and non-Maori artefacts. Taonga tūturu are registered and any pre-approved conservation will be paid for by MCH. Decisions about ownership and custody also come under the POA. Non-Maori items are not registered, conservation is not paid for by MCH and ownership is not regulated unless the items are to be taken overseas.

After 1780 in New Zealand there were places in which Maori and non-Maori lived together, e.g., whaling and sealing stations, trading centres, farm settlements, mission stations, etc. Unless there is very good archival information it is not always easy to determine who lived at a certain place, and on occasions different ethnic groups might have occupied the same place at different times or at the same time. Archaeologists may find it difficult to determine

who lived at an early post-contact site and whether objects were used by Maori or non-Maori. This has consequences for registration and conservation.

There is another issue when it comes to sites occupied between 1900 and 1957. The focus of most archaeological investigations under the Historic Places Act 1993 (HPA) and Resource Management Act 1991 is on sites dating prior to 1900. However, the POA applies to all sites more than 50 years old, many of which are currently not the subject of HPA authorities.

### **Definition of artefact or taonga tūturu**

For archaeologists the term artefact includes all those items manufactured for use or resulting from the process of manufacture. Examples include stone tools, flakes and cores, glass and metal objects, wooden items and shavings, fibre products and hanks, leather objects and off-cuts. The reason behind including the waste from manufacturing is that it tells a lot about the manner of manufacture and, sometimes, where the object is no longer present, what was made, e.g., leather off-cuts may show that a shoe was made. Note that archaeologists distinguish artefacts from food waste such as shell, bone, plant materials and associated charcoal and hangi stones, as well as soils and peat which may contain other information that can yield evidence of past human occupation.

The term taonga tūturu includes all finished items made by Maori and those items used by Maori, but it does not include waste and by-products of manufacturing such as “flakes, shells, oven stones and other ‘scientific material’” unless there is evidence that the object had a secondary use. To an archaeologist, flakes would be regarded as by-products of manufacturing, whereas shells and oven stones generally would not (some shells were used as artefacts on occasion), and many flakes have evidence of secondary use.

Firstly, there is an inconsistency in the term taonga tūturu, so that modified flakes may be classed as taonga tūturu, whereas waste flakes are not. This in turn relies on the ability of the archaeologist or analyst to differentiate modification and use, which is not always easy. Secondly, the definition of taonga tūturu focuses on worth and value, which generally does not apply to any stone flakes, whether modified or not. Thirdly, the term taonga tūturu does not easily equate to the groupings employed by archaeologists. Furthermore, splitting of the assemblage might occur under the POA, if Maori claim taonga tūturu, but not manufacturing waste and midden samples (see below).

### **Secret files**

If taonga tūturu and other materials from an urupa or wahi tapu are reburied on site, the issue of notification and the location of deposition may

be sensitive. At present secret Site Record files could be used to overcome this. However, secret files may not be continued after digitisation of the Site Record Files. This then may be an issue where there are items of some value, either monetary or spiritual, and it may not be prudent to report the location.

### **Notification**

MCH requires notification of newly found Maori artefacts within 28 days of the end of an excavation. This is potentially a problem for archaeologists. In a few excavations the analysis of all material is done on site, so it would be possible for excavators to write up the Z-forms soon after the dig has ended. However, in most excavations, even those in which all items are recorded by electronic alidade, it is not until all the items have been analysed that the true number and all details can be determined. The time taken for this process depends on the number and range of items found. In the process of analysis and report writing it is preferable to revisit the items, which may not be possible if they have already been deposited. Furthermore, in the summer archaeologists often have to undertake more than one excavation and cannot begin the process of analysis for several months, until the end of the earthworks season. Under the HP conditions the final report for small to moderate-sized excavations is required within a year, and large excavations may take longer to reach report stage.

### **Representative samples of historic artefacts**

At present there are very different methods employed regarding the disposal and housing of historic artefacts. A session run by Louise Furey highlighted this in the 2007 NZAA conference at Hanmer. It was suggested that a workshop be held to discuss this in more detail with the aim of standardising the methods of sampling, analysis and defining a representative sample.

The other major issue is the housing of the objects. At present there is no dedicated place where such items can be housed, especially if they are to be used as a comparative collection, as this requires databases, access and retrieval processes.

Furthermore, there may be conflicts between those deemed to be representative that should be in museum or other repository, and those the landowner might want to keep.

### **Temporary or permanent storage**

Many museums do not have the dedicated space to temporarily house objects. Such storage has to be under a different system to those on long-term loan.

Furthermore, under the HPA there is the requirement to house whole assemblages (artefacts, midden and soil samples, and notebooks and other data) from one site together. Some museums have this as a criterion for acceptance, as they are reluctant to house fragmented assemblages requiring resources to track dispersed components for users. Currently there are few repositories for midden and soil samples by themselves.

Implicit in the POA and explicit in the HPA is the ability to revisit the artefacts, collections and assemblages. This also raises issues of databases, access and retrieval.

### **Splitting the collections**

The issue of splitting archaeological assemblages does reflect the view that the material recovered from the site is a 'whole', e.g., that taonga tūturu are related to manufacturing waste, midden, soil samples and all the information recovered. Obviously what has been recovered is a sample, especially where parts of the site still remain. In large-scale developments, where site/s are totally destroyed it may be all that still exists.

In the past, many assemblages have been split, with special artefacts being deposited at museums, samples at universities and the notes accompanying the archaeologist overseas. Some classes of item, such as human bone or artefacts requiring special treatment, were often separated from others. This has resulted in problems when trying to reconstruct what was recovered in order to re-analyse the site, or for exhibition descriptions.

In the future, it may be that the various types of material from archaeological sites will be more easily managed by electronic databases and this will no longer be a problem.

### **Time to achieve custody under the POA**

Note that the time between recovering objects from a site and custody being awarded may be quite a lengthy process (possibly up to several years), particularly where there are conservation considerations.

This may be of concern for iwi, who might be suspicious or frustrated by the delay. It may also be a concern for museums who temporarily house artefacts until custody is determined. If the archaeologist becomes aware of any such issues, they should be addressed to MCH as they arise.